



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Toxoplasmosis

What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic disease caused by the protozoa, *Toxoplasma gondii*. People with this disease may not have any symptoms, a mild illness causing lymph node swelling, or a syndrome similar to mono. The protozoa have been found in most warm blooded animals including pets, livestock, and humans. For most people, toxoplasmosis is a mild illness. It can be fatal to people with weak immune systems or cause severe problems for unborn children.

How is toxoplasmosis spread?

People get toxoplasmosis by one of several ways:

- Eating unwashed vegetables;
- Eating or handling undercooked or raw meat;
- Changing litter boxes of infected cats and touching hands to mouth before washing hands; and
- Working with soil that has cat feces in it and touching hands to mouths before washing hands.

Livestock, wildlife, and poultry can all get toxoplasmosis.

Who is at risk for developing severe toxoplasmosis?

- Infants born to mothers who are recently (during or just before pregnancy) infected with *Toxoplasma gondii*.
- Persons with very weak immune systems, such as individuals with HIV/AIDS, those taking chemotherapy, and those who have received an organ transplant.

If I am at risk for severe toxoplasmosis, can I keep my cat?

Yes, you may keep your cat. There are several things you can do to avoid being exposed:

- Change the litter box daily. The parasite cannot infect you until 1 to 5 days after it is shed in a cat's feces. If you are pregnant or have a weak immune system:
 1. Avoid changing cat litter. If no one else can change the litter for you, wear gloves that you can throw away and wash your hands with soap and water as soon as you are finished. Do not eat or smoke before washing your hands.
 2. Always keep your cat indoors.
 3. Do not adopt or handle stray cats or kittens. Do not get a new cat while you are pregnant.
- Feed cats only canned or dried store bought food or well-cooked table food. Never feed your cat raw or undercooked meats.
- Keep your outdoor sandbox covered.

How do I know if I have toxoplasmosis?

You cannot tell without seeing your doctor. Your doctor will give you an exam and labs tests to see if you have toxoplasmosis.

Most cases are so mild they show no signs. For those that are sick, the most common signs are body discomfort, fatigue, fever, sore throat, and muscle pain. Some people may have a mono-like illness with a rash and swollen liver.

Babies that get the parasite before they are born may have vision problems, problems with learning, or be mentally challenged. Some babies may die right after they are born.

How is toxoplasmosis treated?

Most cases of toxoplasmosis do not require drug treatment. Some drugs can help to lessen the symptoms. Your doctor can prescribe these drugs to you.

How is toxoplasmosis prevented?

- Fully cook all meats and poultry (microwaving should not be used as a cooking method);
- Eat and drink only pasteurized dairy products;
- Change litter boxes daily, throw away all used litter in sealed plastic bag;
- Wash vegetables before eating;
- Cover sand boxes to keep outdoor cats from using them as litter boxes;
- Wash hands of children after playing outside or in a sandbox. Do this before they eat or drink.
- Wash hands with soap and water after working with soil or after touching raw meats, poultry, or vegetables.

To lessen the risk of cats getting the parasite, don't allow them outside and feed them only cooked meats or store bought food. Cats often become infected by

eating rodents, birds, or other small mammals. Cats that get the parasite will shed it for approximately two weeks.

Pregnant women, women thinking of getting pregnant, and people with weak immune systems should take extra steps to prevent getting sick.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/toxoplasmosis/>.

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